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NOT CITIZENS, BUT PERSONS:

THE ETHICS IN ACTION OF PERFORMANCE'S INTIMATE WORK

In responding to 9/11 through a critique of Austin's speech-act theory, Mark

Franko writes:

Now the event that 'happens to us' 'mocks' ... [our] understandings of the speech act. The event, in other terms, is neither conventional, logocentric, nor iterative. The singular presence of 'what takes place' *takes the place of* the performative, and mocks it, displaces it, and supersedes it. In other terms, the event disarms the performative by effectively removing its capacity to respond. The event leaves the act 'speechless'. (in Lepecki, 2004, p.116)

I want to compare two scenes of wrighting history in recent British theatre – one from *The World in Pictures* (2006) by Sheffield-based Forced Entertainment, the other from *Make-Believe* (2009) by Manchester-based Quarantine – as possible answers to this 'speechlessness'. They both express something of a return in contemporary performance to story-telling, more precisely an anxiety around accounting for global forces and how they impact on everyday life, that is, a concern for the making of histories. Performance generally is anxious – to say something meaningful, about geopolitics, war and terror. There is a risk that this could lead to an erroneous re-objectification of performance: how, against its own eventness, its true or proper work is seen to be at the discursive level of the 'issue' (consider the current interest in verbatim theatre: see Barnett, 2005,

Boon, 2007, Bottoms, 2006, Paget, 1990, Rebellaton, 2007, Young, 2009). The same thinking had reached its previous apogee in the 1970s expressing 'the personal is political', heralding 'political dramas' exploring various 'socio-political issues', within which even the most intimate desires were extrapolated from the person and grouped into verifiable categories depending upon 'objective' criteria, such as class or gender or race. As Foucault had pointed out about the general force of history-making in his championing of post-structuralist historiographies:

Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything which has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted history. (Foucault, 1970, p.12)

This objectification is not without value, especially at certain critically political times: to follow Foucault again, it at least allows one to name oneself as victim. In reaction to this, during the 80s and 90s, many artists provocatively attended to the fragment with its transitory desires, ignoring capital's base-urges of fear and want with its terrors. The current anxiety around performance is because reality now appears too real to either ignore or trivialize. However, that reality never went away: we have always indulged the fragment and then returned home to the Grand Narrative (look at soap operas). Desire as the positive force of capital has always existed in relation to terror, the negative force. So, in response to capital's current crisis and apparent return to terror, both of the world and of its own capacities to transform that world, two contradictory but

intimately related terrors, performance is in danger of two apparently contradictory re-turns. Firstly, towards the objectification of the Grand Narrative, to tell stories again of owning a central Self or at least one in lifelong debt to the bank. And the second, towards the subjective, away from terror and its imperative of collective responsibilities, back towards the womb, towards infantilism, producing a world of absurd and carefree play where nothing really matters.

The *hearsay* of history-writing, so central to the outrage provoked by verbatim theatre, epitomizes this first re-turn in enabling a community of citizens to stabilize around the 'proof' of what was said, or rather, its *re-saying* on stage. Paradoxically, the primary work of this hearsay-saying is reassurance: to put our minds and their imaginations at rest by not only determining the past and confirming that we are already right in our opinions about it, but anticipating the probable outcomes of specific situations derived from that past which will occur in the future, thus connecting up what was with what could be in the closed loop of a narrative logic, effectively predetermining both interpretations of that past and speculations upon possible futures. Like the mother's breast, this force of reassurance is profoundly relational. History can only be *knowledge-able* if it is first relational, that is, capable of being written down, then circulated and articulated amongst a community of initiated knowers, experts, scholars, doctors, engineers, artists, and finally *judged as useful*, that is, *applicable*. History-

writing, hear-saying is meaning-making, in effect, converting anxious, lonely persons into inter-related, mutually responsible citizens. However, Forced Entertainment and Quarantine open up the possibilities of an altogether different *wrighting* of history between a fragmentary, deconstructive relativism and a cosy-ing-up of always already justifiably outraged citizenry, the possibility – in the suspension of judgement inherent in the performance-event itself – of the emergence of a third figure between the person and the citizen – the responsible person.

Both *The World in Pictures* and *Make-Believe* attempt to construct histories of the world through *a wrighting* that draws attention to its own making, both in order to challenge their audiences' senses of history and explore to what extent we are today made by those histories: the former from a classically postmodern, deconstructive turn; the latter from the personal testimonies of its performers drawn from Britain's migrant communities: the one layering pastiche stereotypes on top of each other in a palimpsest of B-movie cod-histories; the other rooted in specific family stories inherited by the performers. Both play with the appearing on stage of the person amongst the citizenry in two very different, but resonant scenes of wrighting world-history. In *The World in Pictures*, after a sequence of cartoon characters from cavemen to the present day 'represent' the 'entire' history of the world, a performer (Jerry Killick) stands before the audience and extends that knowingly simplistic chronological logic into a history

of the future: the perfect tense is re-conjugated into the future perfect: the happened into the will-have-happened. By way of this surprising linguistic shift, the audience moves from the 'objective' (read 'intellectually superior') observer of a classically postmodern, comically ironic re-presenting (which incidentally risks the return to the infantile, beloved of apologists for irresponsibility), to an awkward, subjective *sensing* of one's own body in that seat in that theatre in that moment. This transformation from witnessing a pageant of picture-book, de-personalized, 'state' History, to confronting their own mortality, is felt as a mood of profound unsettling, realized from what one likes to call the series of moments that make up one's life. Through a linguistic turn that proposes the future as if it had already happened, the ontological fact of one's own death, in all its Freudian apoplexy and Heideggerian anxiety, is made real *personally* as *the person* appearing from out of the anonymous crowd of witnesses, both alone in the world and already virtually dead.

Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*. (Heidegger, 1962, p.294)

Although one knows one is sitting amongst a theatre audience, hearing this proposing of a possible future as a certain past, one feels alone. This together aloneness is produced by forcing the narrative logic of history-writing *intimately alongside* the absolute non-relationality of one's own death, thus denying, in the very instance of its proof – that is, its telling, the force of history. One's anxious

need to reassure oneself that one is part of an answer to terror, in effect, part of the Grand Narrative, is provoked by the very same act of telling, which, through its future-perfect mood, instantly revokes the possibility of any reassurance in reminding one of one's own future, one's own death. It is this intimacy that occasions the scene's queasy disquiet, the falling away of collective laughter, to be replaced by shuffling in seats, as it becomes clear that the performer will progress through the predetermined logic of his future-history beyond each one's death to the end of the world, of time itself and the very history that will have already been told.

Quarantine's *Make-Believe* too attempts to wright a history of the world, however, by crucially different means and with a critically different outcome. Echoing Forced Entertainment's aesthetic, a group of performers bring chairs and sit down in front of heavy, red curtains before the audience, and invite them to list the key events in world history. What emerges through this dialogue is a set of audience-members' attitudes to both the specific task itself (on the night I was there ranging from serious engagement to sarcastic attempts at trashing) and to the very process of constructing a history. Through humour and solemnity, the gaps and lacunae in the possibility of any single history telling 'the whole story' were made apparent, not only the facts of events (the 'objective'), but also the diversity of points of viewing those facts (the 'subjective'). A play of power emerged amongst the audience and performers, which had up until then only

been obliquely alluded to in the personal accounts of the performers' own family stories of migration to and experiences in Britain. In this way, the larger geopolitical, economic, imperial 'state' History, which the audience were by and large automatically producing, was folded into the particularities of personal histories, occasioning a growing self-awareness of each one's and each other's agencies in telling histories.

With *The World in Pictures* agency was first invoked and then instantly vanquished in the fact of personal death, the possibility of authentic living thus disabled in the shift from de-personalized, cod history to the personal eventuality of death. Strangely, although facing his audience, the performer's future-perfect had the effect of leaping over the now-here of that face-to-face encounter.

Whereas Quarantine choose to stage their dialogue within that inbetween: effectively, the very event of the dialogue itself demonstrates the possibilities for constructing futures in negotiating possible pasts: now-here the *saying* of what for Forced Entertainment will already have been *said* enables an ethical play between various subjective and objective positions and pro-positions to be communally produced and entertained.

This 'saying to the Other' – this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent* – precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being. (Levinas, 1969, p.48)

Furthermore, the exchanging of possibilities between audience-members and performers, the discussing of how each 'fact' may relate to the accumulation of this particular history, is progressively felt to require a suspending of judgement: the sarcastic contributor is gently but resolutely challenged and the dialogue flows past them and on, exposing their remark for its intent to collapse into the already said the opportunity for possibility. And the longer judgement is thus suspended the deeper the understanding that the actually existing facts of each person's own history can be collectively seen as both a given and a point of departure. The presence of a two-year-old child (hopefully with much more ahead of him than behind him) and his parents as performers reinforces this requirement to understand both the gift and the opportunity of our histories, to feel what in Emmanuel Levinas' terms would be the unlimited responsibility for the other.

The act of consciousness is motivated by the presence of a third party alongside of the neighbour approached. A third party is also approached; and the relationship between the neighbour and the third party cannot be indifferent to me when I approach. There must be a justice among incomparable ones. There must be a comparison amongst incomparables and a synopsis, a togetherness and contemporaneousness; there must be thematization, thought, history and inscription. (Levinas, 1998, p.16)

Thus, to follow Levinas further, this dialogue makes not only the constructedness of any historiography apparent and problematically rooted in each one's own personal experience, but, in the intimacy of its exchanging and gathering together by means of the task, also overcomes any traumatizing of the person in

their own death: it opens up each one's infinite responsibility for the other actually in the event of dialoguing.

The approach, inasmuch as it is a sacrifice, confers a sense on death. In it the absolute singularity of the responsible one encompasses the generality or generalization of death. ... But we can have responsibilities and attachments through which death takes on a meaning. That is because, from the start, the other affects us despite ourselves. (Levinas, 1998, p.129)

This capacity of performance to disclose, what I would name, a third character somewhere between person and citizen goes somewhat further than Tracy Davis's important contribution to our understanding of theatricality as a necessary component of being an active citizen in a democratic society: 'a person must decide to be a spectator, not merely a witness, engaged and conscious of the transaction of display and reception' (in Davis & Postlewait, 2003, p.129). In making this decision, she argues that 'it is the act of withholding sympathy that makes us become spectators to ourselves and others' (ibid. p.154), thereby inaugurating the citizen in recognizing the theatricality of civil society and power. However, this decisive act condemns each to occupy one of two mutually discrete positions: that of the traditionally subjective and, therefore, emotionally manipulable person in the crowd; or that of the classically objective and, therefore, emotionally disinterested citizen sitting on the jury of history. The one character lacks clarity, decisiveness and the ability to see beyond the moment; the other can only judge by way of commonsense and precedent, normatively

and unfeelingly, reducing others to the status of objects in Zola's 'experimental cage'. So, whilst many theatre-makers may now be attending with an especial urgency to questions of rights and justice, that is, in Davis's terms, *how the theatrical makes a space for citizens to appear*, I would propose that a more primary problem, for which performance is quintessentially better suited, is *how to make a space for persons to appear before each other*. This both precedes our daily necessity to act as citizens and exceeds it: indeed, our working sense of citizenship is but a shorthand, a ready reckoner to the much more complex problem of becoming a person, about which most people have very little to say.

The person hides in the citizen: it avoids embarrassment and eases itself amongst society dressed as a citizen: it worries it is doing things correctly: so much so that at the end of the day everything civil is simply and only a matter of etiquette and manners, although getting such matters wrong can lead to genocide and wars, as evidenced by the family histories of Quarantine's performers. However, the person is not adequately expressed by way of the social, through proclaiming their 'gender' or 'sexuality' or 'ethnicity', since such things can never belong to them: they are socially owned and legally stated. And yet the problem of the person is *occasioned* by society, by acting as a citizen, because what provokes the person to realize that it has this problem with its personhood is its inevitable *mixing with other persons*. The full and immediate depth and extent of this problem is made manageable by thinking of other

persons *as a society* and as such embodying 'reasonable' and 'sociable' behaviour accordingly. Whilst this may do for the everyday, the problem re-emerges in one's solitariness, at night alone, or sudden sense of distance and confusion in the crowd, or face to face with the beloved. At these points we cannot avoid the perturbing encounter with our own personhood and its struggling to be. And even then, this is not about 'becoming an individual' or 'expressing one's self' or 'achieving one's potential', since the individual is, of course, a social construct whose appearance shows how the social shifts its frames of reference from time to time in order to provide an easily graspable, ready-to-hand solution for the everyday. No, finally, *the person is not an individual*, describable by way of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or body-mass: *a person is a style*; and the problem of the person is precisely how to realize and sustain a style for the particularities of each person's personhood, *how to perform*.

A style is a certain manner of dealing with situations, which I identify or understand in an individual. ... I experience the unity of the world as I recognize a style. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.327)

Performance's contribution to this problem is that it allows the person to appear before the citizen: *before* in two senses: in front of them, standing suddenly before them *in space*; and preceding them, having a life previous and a history, before them *in time*. This is unique to performance: *the person in society*. In the novel, the person may appear in the reader's imagination; in film, before the

viewer as image; in music, as wonderful abstraction. But only in performance, as person *in touch*, in both flesh and word, in space and time: and this appearance is a miracle and so can only be recognized *outside* of the everyday in theatres. Ordinarily, the many miraculous appearances of personhood go unnoticed in the everyday. However, in (extraordinary) performance, as with *The World in Pictures*, we are obliged to attend to it: the person provokes us citizens to shed our civil protection and, as a gathering, approach this (new) figure *as persons*.

The Other not only comes to us from a context [the world] but signifies by itself, without that mediation. ... [T]his mundane signification [of the world] is disturbed and upset by another presence, abstract (or more exactly, absolute), non-integrated in the world. That presence consists in coming to us, *making an entry*. Which can be stated thus: the *phenomenon* that is the apparition of the Other is also *face*; or again (to show this entry at every instant new in its immanence and essential historicity of the phenomenon), the epiphany of the face is *visitation*. (Levinas, 2006, p.31)

This co-presence of persons founds performance: you and me and them appearing before one another: a person facing another person understood by (way of) the (excluded) third – the citizen. The performance-event only exists through the complicit and inclusive encountering of communal attending, of spending time together, of dialoguing. Furthermore, this coming together produces difference, a standing-out in the crowd, a recognition that this very inbetween, across which we come together, is also a gap that divides us, an incomplete medium, or rather, a bundling of media (middles) each with their very own kind of incompleteness, their very own histories. So, this dialoguing

jointly sustains an attending to not-knowing or the problem of knowing, that is, the problem of the person, 'out-standing standing-within' (Heidegger, 1978, p.192).

The performance-event remains only for as long as the citizen has not yet incorporated what differentiates it from the person, which is precisely the person's problem of becoming. If the citizen attempts to take their place both in and out of this relation person to person, to judge it, then the style of the person will always exceed the description and laws of that citizen-judge. So much so that the citizen is forced to judge the very applicability and validity of those laws, the same laws that authorize that citizen to be and to judge. In this way, the person provokes the deconstruction of the citizen: this is the particular ethico-political dimension of *Make-Believe's* invitation to *re-wright* history.

A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the I to the other, as a *face to face*, as delineating a distance in depth – that of conversation, of goodness, of Desire. ... The I is not a contingent formation by which the same and the other, as logical determinations of being, can in addition be reflected *within a thought*. It is in order that alterity be produced in being that a 'thought' is needed and that an I is needed. The irreversibility of the relation can be produced only if the relation is effected by one of the terms as the very movement of transcendence, as the *traversing* of the distance, and not as a recording of, or the psychological invention of this movement. (Levinas, 1969, p.39-40)

So, by ways of the face-to-facing, the constituting of the person happens as a 'traversing', a crossing across the void that separates the one from the other,

through the wrighting of a history. These *crossings across* the in-betweens opened out between persons and histories, the various re-wrightings, disclose the discontinuities between senses of perception and selves, technologies and texts, citizens and persons, which our everyday need to get on with life would seek to cover over and occlude, but which performance *forces to appear*. The forcing inherent in this encounter is what I have called elsewhere performance's *de-second-naturing* at work (see Giddens & Jones): to express what it feels like to be in-between the in-betweens, in the middle of the middle of things: the undoing of the strong bonds of comparability the word with the thing with the event, the jangling of the strong harmonies of synchronicity the ear with the eye with the room and our times, the wrecking of the strong principles of complicity our self with our world with our histories. True discontinuity, the actually felt irruption of *out-standing standing-within* is felt as both a *mood* of de-naturing and an *instant* when-where one's self is forced out of its self, *interested* in (in the sense of *esse/being inter/between*) the world. *Make-Believe* provoked this interest.

The other as other, as a neighbour, is in his presence never equal to his proximity. ... Between the one I am and the other for whom I am responsible there gapes open a difference, without a basis in community. ... Proximity is a difference, a non-coinciding, an arrhythmia in time. ... The unnaratable other loses his face as a neighbour in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable ..., unconvertible into a history, irreducible to the simultaneousness of writing, the eternal present of a writing that records or presents results. (Levinas, 1998, p.166)

In the performance-event this is felt as a temporary perturbation before one returns to the everyday – the shift of tense from perfect to future perfect; the opening up of a dialogue that exposes ideological positions and our investment in them. And in order to make this re-turn to the everyday, to become once again passable as a citizen, the re-naturing of our natures must happen, but never quite *in the same way* as before, that is, with a style now not quite one's own, or rather, one's own style obliged to answer the call and tremble at the touch of another's – the person to person of the human. In this re-manifolding of the person into the citizen, something remains of performance's third character set free to range about the world. And this something, this *thingsome* – for want of any better word, will always be inbetween the Self, the Subject, the person and the citizen, inbetween senses and words, inbetween flesh and their histories – *the responsible person*.

True to the radical alterity of its nature, it is this responsible person's *thingsomeness* that ensures that performance's intimate work cannot be appropriated to found a society, a re-formation of the Human, because its very driving forces always exceed the stabilizing and reassuring bent of any citizenry. Effectively, performance *as event* is *a gerund* halfway between action and thing, idea and matter: it never solidifies in its various multifarious furies into a community with its principles, opinions and objectives. And yet, however fundamentally *impersonal*, to follow Levinas, its wrighting only works *by way of*

the person before the other: it can only be felt *personally by way of the other*, that is, experienced in the particular modalities of becoming-person as one possible *amongst a host* of all possible possibles of personhood. So, performance uniquely actualizes Levinas' understanding of the person coming into being between the totality of the world and the possibilities of infinity. In responding to our felt speechlessness when confronting capital and terror, both Forced Entertainment and Quarantine go beyond the reassuring hearsay of writing history, with its tendency to stabilize Subjects with their objectified relations to normative interpretations of the Grand Narrative, *towards producing in the saying a third figure*, actualized some no-where now-here in the performance-event itself, between citizen and person – *the responsible person*.

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